

A Certain Place

Sermon preached July 19, 2026

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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The summer after my first year of seminary, I preached my very first sermon for a real congregation, at a UCC church in Maine. It was a sermon on today's first lesson, because this text was assigned and I was in Ken's hometown of Bethel, Maine. We have a picture somewhere of our girls standing next to the church sign announcing the service and the sermon: "A Certain Place," by Nina Pooley. That was in the summer of 2002, 24 years ago!

Unsurprisingly, this lesson is one of my favorite texts in the Hebrew scriptures, both for its content and for the memories it evokes. When you pair it with our Gospel text, it's a powerful reminder of our role as children of God. Both what we are called to be and do, and what we are NOT called to be and do.

Jacob is fleeing from his brother's righteous and well-deserved wrath. As we enter the story, Jacob comes to "a certain place." I can picture him - completely exhausted, collapsing to the ground, so tired that he uses a rock for a pillow. There he has his famous dream - of a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Suddenly in his dream God is standing next to him, saying - *'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham...; the land on which you lie I will give to you...; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and east and north and south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.'*

When Jacob wakes up he says, *"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*

Friends, descendants of Abraham's offspring, we are meant to be as plentiful as the dust of the earth, and through us all the families of the earth shall be blessed. We are to be as copious and abundant as the pollen Craig reminded us of last week. Blessing generously - to the west, east, north, and south. Blessing everywhere, blessing everyone. All the families of the earth.

In case we're tempted to be less than lavish in our blessing, our Gospel text weighs in - with the parable of the weeds. Again, we meet angels; they are the reapers at the harvest at the end of the age. They will reap out "all causes of sin, and all evildoers." That's their job, not ours. The weeding is up to the angels. We're just the extravagant dust of blessing.

Of course, blessing all the families of the earth is more difficult than it sounds. It means I have to move beyond my prejudices and fears. I have to look past issues of politics, and economics. I

have face my own blind spots - petty prejudices that sneak up to surprise me. I have to overcome my fears and defenses when I'm tempted to hold others at arm's length.

But I much prefer the challenge of overcoming my own stuff, rather than the role of judge and jury. And the risk of getting that wrong - even once. Thankfully, judgment is beyond our pay grade. Judgement is up to God and God alone.

Now, I need us to take a slight aside for a moment, I promise it ties into our text, but it's more personal. Thursday was a tough day for me, as priest and pastor for this community. The day began with a holy but difficult pastoral visit, and my heartache intensified when another, equally difficult pastoral situation was shared with me that afternoon. By 2:45, I felt like I'd been run over, my heart was heavy and full. I was gathering items for our vestry retreat yesterday, and went downstairs to the dining room. There, Nancy Lamoreaux saw my face, and told me it looked like I needed a hug; so she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me. She didn't ask me what was going on, she just responded with care for me, and told me she hoped I'd be able to come down to Table later that afternoon. I went to my 3pm meeting - feeling a little better, though still sore from being hit by the heartache bus. But my malaise couldn't stand up to the energy and enthusiasm of the meeting with Josie, Craig, and Leah - our parish administrator hiring team. As you can imagine, meeting with them is always a good thing - given their incredible skills, dedication to the parish, joy, and so much laughter. After our meeting, I got to go downstairs to help a little bit, as Thursday's Table team served meals. Nancy greeted me with a, "You made it, my Friend!" Honestly, everyone greets me when I come to help at Table, "Hi Nina!" repeated over and over. It's silly, and it always makes me smile.

I'm not doing this justice, but I'm trying to explain some of the many reasons why this place, this congregation - matter so much to me. In this place I understand what Jacob was feeling when he proclaims, *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God!"*

Many of you have wished me well on my upcoming sabbatical. I've heard a few folks voicing concerns, saying things like, "Please come back, and don't leave as soon as you return, like the last two priests did." I know that circumstances surrounding the last two sabbaticals were complicated, and were specific situations- so this is not meant to criticize anyone.

But I want to assure you, (or warn you, depending on your take!). I've never had a better job, I've never been happier professionally, and personally - you are my "certain place." And I'm not leaving you. Just going on sabbatical.

I have a slight update on that timing. I have another Sunday in the pulpit, as my sabbatical start date was to be August 1st. Now, with the wardens' permission and the support of our vestry, I'm going to take my two weeks of continuing education, before officially beginning sabbatical.

That means I can be present with the two families who are experiencing serious pastoral crises. This time will allow me to build specific pastoral support for them. Because I need to for my own heart's sake.

I've revised my timetable in Scotland, and will be returning two weeks later than we originally anticipated. But that feels infinitely better than leaving too soon. Thank you for your understanding and patience as we shift things for pastoral reasons.

In the coming weeks, I'll be holding fast to the words the Lord says to Jacob, *"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."*

And I share that promise with you - I'm coming back to this land, to this place, to this community. *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven."*

Beloved Ones, together, may we continue to bless the families of the earth - as prolific as dust, as insidious as pollen... sharing God's love to the ends of the earth. And wherever our adventures take us, may we know we have a home here, in this certain place. *How awesome is this place, this is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven. Amen.*